

March 24, 1999

Contradictions Abound...

Did the Administration Respond “Vigorously” to Chinese Nuclear Espionage?

When the *New York Times* recently reported the startling story of Chinese espionage at a U.S. nuclear weapons laboratory, legitimate questions were raised as to why it took the Clinton Administration more than three years to respond. [See RPC’s “China’s Theft of Nuclear Secrets” and “Commentators Hit Clinton Administration on Nuclear Technology Theft and Suspicious China Ties,” both issued on 3/12/99]. When pressed, top officials and the President himself claimed they had “moved vigorously” and taken “all appropriate steps” to address the espionage and prevent any recurrence.

Yet, only one day after the President’s assurances, Energy Secretary Bill Richardson announced seven new initiatives to strengthen the Department of Energy (DOE)’s counterintelligence efforts. Now, it should be asked: If the Administration’s approach was as comprehensive as claimed and “all appropriate steps” had been taken, why the need for these seven new initiatives? The American people deserve answers to a series of questions the Administration has been unwilling to address.

The Administration’s Defense

On March 8, the Monday after the *New York Times* story, Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson began the mantra heard for the next week: “We have moved vigorously, the President, the national security advisor, the FBI. When we learned of these damaging allegations, we investigated. We now have in place some very vigorous measures” [CNN Morning News, 3/8/99].

One day later, however, Secretary Richardson admitted that it was only in the past few months that the Administration focused on the issue: “We have moved ahead with some very strong measures so that this doesn’t happen again. We believe we’ve moved actively, **especially in the last couple of months**” [CNBC, “Hardball with Chris Matthews,” 3/9/99].

And Secretary Richardson was apparently convinced these measures were working: “With the measures in place and the counterintelligence presence that we have at the labs now, the polygraphs; the increased security. . . we believe the problem is addressed.” He continued, “there’s no evidence of any more (espionage) cases” [AP State & Local Wire, 3/10/99].

These measures included: placing counterintelligence professionals on-site at weapons

labs; doubling this year's counterintelligence budget to \$15 million and requesting another doubling of this budget next year; changing the screening and the approval process for foreign scientists seeking access to DOE labs; tightening security checks and reviews — including the use of polygraphs — for DOE scientists working in sensitive programs [Energy Secretary Bill Richardson, Prepared Statement Before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, 3/16/99].

Yet by the Administration's own admission, these measures were not enough, because on March 17, the Energy Secretary announced "seven new initiatives to strengthen DOE's counterintelligence efforts." So just one day after Richardson lauded the Administration's "very, very strong response" to the espionage case, he pointed to the need to: add \$8 million for cyber-security; impose stricter controls for classified documents; appoint a former CIA Director to review security for DOE's foreign visitors program; monitor DOE's progress in implementing these plans; reexamine our counterintelligence files; submit to Congress an annual report on DOE's counterintelligence and foreign visitors programs; and conduct an internal inquiry into allegations that a Department official tried to prevent the sharing of information with members of Congress.

This laundry list of requirements points out a contradiction that so far no one has considered: if the Administration's plans were already so strong, why were additional requirements necessary?

Legitimate Questions Remain

While these seven new initiatives may be welcome, they appear part of a public relations strategy to repel legitimate questions such as:

- Why was the White House so slow to pay attention to the problem?
- Why was the DOE and the Administration so slow in responding to evidence of espionage?
- Why was security at the weapons labs so lax in the first place?
- Why is the Administration continuing to invite scientists from the People's Republic of China to our weapons labs?
- By how much did this Administration cut counterintelligence spending since 1992?
- Why have Administration officials tried to downplay the national security significance of the transfer to China of our nation's most sensitive nuclear secrets?

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